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ABSTRACT

Black adolescents have learned a well-defined fear of "acting white": a fear of excelling in academic arenas which traditionally have been defined as the prerogative of white Americans. The focus of this analysis is the resulting conflict experienced by academically successful and unsuccessful black students in one predominantly black high school in Washington, D.C. The basic premise is that black students experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance around the issue of academic excellence in the school context. This paper contains four sections. The first briefly reviews the theoretical and ethnographic literature on how the black ecological structure affects the school performance of black students, highlighting the fictive kinship system in the black community. The second section reviews existing research literature and autobiographical data on black students' success, noting the existence of a fictive kinship system in the black community and in academic success (including the notion of "acting white"). The third part considers ethnographic evidence from recent fieldwork, presenting preliminary findings from that research setting. The final section discusses the implications of the analysis, focusing on the "burden of acting white" and academic success among black adolescents. A six-page reference list is appended. (LHW)

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BLACK STUDENTS' SCHOOL SUCCESS: COPING WITH THE "BURDEN OF 'ACTING WHITE'"[1]

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I. INTRODUCTION

On Monday, February 15, 1982, Dorothy Gilliam began her column in The Washington Post with the following vignette:

> My friend was talking to her son, who is 20, when he blurted out a secret half as old as he. It was the explanation for his ambivalence toward success. It began, he said, in his early school years, when a fifth-grade teacher questioned whether he had really written the outstanding essay he'd turned in about the life of squirrels. It ended when the teacher gave him a grade that clearly showed that she did not believe the boy's outraged denials of plagiarism.
>
> Because the young man is black and the teacher is white, and because such incidents had happened before, he arrived at a youthful solution: 'I never tried again,' he recently told his mother, who had suffered misery as her son's grades had plummeted and his interest in school had waned. He had sold himself short because he was humiliated.
>
> Today he reads the classics but has only a high school diploma; today he can finally articulate his feelings. Today he feels he was manipulated by society not to achieve, and feels he has been tricked into lowering his performance. He is furious that he blocked his own talents.
>
> As my distraught friend recounted this disturbing episode, we looked at each other and grimaced. Each of us know people of her son's generation, and of our own, who are ambivalent about success (Gilliam 1982:B1).

Gilliam goes on to recount how the existing ecological conditions led Black parents to teach their children double messages: "You must be twice as good to go half as far," and, on the other hand, "Don't get the big head, don't blow your own horn." The critical point being stressed in this analysis is that Black adolescents have learned these lessons well; they have learned them so well that what has emerged in the school context in some segments of the Black community is a well-defined fear of "acting white"--i.e., a fear of excelling in academic arenas which traditionally have been defined as the prerogative of white Americans.

It is this resulting conflict experienced by academically successful and unsuccessful Black students in one predominantly Black high school in Washington, D.C., which is the focus of this analysis. My basic premise is that Black students experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance around the issue of academic excellence in the school context. Consequently, the major focus of the following analysis is a brief description of how and why a sample group of academically successful Black adolescents "cope with the burden of 'acting white'" in the school context. This paper employs the idea of "acting white" to describe the contradictory nature of schooling for Black children, and their concurrent embracement and rejection of those behaviors defined as "acting white", utilizing supportive data from my recent research and other sources to support this claim.

Among the behaviors which Black students identify as "acting white" are: (1) speaking standard English; (2) listening to white music and white radio stations; (3) going to the opera or ballet; (4) spending a lot of time in the library studying; (5) working hard to get good grades in school; (6) getting good grades in school, i.e., being known as a "brainiac"; (7) going to the Smithsonian; (8) going to a Rolling Stones concert at the Capital Center; (9) doing volunteer work; (10) going camping, hiking, or mountain climbing; (1) having cocktails or a cocktail party; (12) going to symphony orchestra concerts; (13) having a party with no music; (14) listening to classical music; (15) being on time; (16) reading and writing poetry; and (17) putting on "airs", etc. While the above list is not exhaustive, it is nonetheless indicative of which behaviors in the school context are likely to be negatively sanctioned and therefore avoided by large numbers of students.

As operationally defined in this paper, the idea of "coping with the burden of 'acting white'" suggests that Black adolescents who pursue academic

excellence are frequently perceived by their peers as "being kind of white" (Weis 1985:101), and therefore not truly Black. It is the resulting tension between those students who choose to behave in ways which their peers define as "acting white" and those students who opt to limit their behaviors in the school context to those sanctioned by the group, that is explored in this analysis.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section of the paper I briefly review the theoretical and ethnographic literature on how the Black ecological structure affects the school performance of Black students, highlighting what I have described elsewhere (see Fordham 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b) as the fictive kinship system in the Black community. In the second section, I briefly review existing research literature and autobiographical data of Black students' school success, noting the existence of a fictive kinship system in the Black community and in academic success (including the notion of "acting white"). The third part of the paper briefly considers ethnographic evidence from my recent fieldwork, presenting preliminary findings from that research setting. The fourth and final section of the paper discusses the implications of the analysis, focusing on the "burden of acting white" and academic success among Black adolescents.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ogbu (1978, 1982) identifies Black Americans as belonging to that genre of nondominant-group peoples he aptly labels castelike minorities. For him, castelike minorities are distinguishable from other types of minorities in the following ways: (1) they were involuntarily yet permanently incorporated into the American society; (2) they have been and/or are currently victimized by the existence of a pervasive and persistent job ceiling; and (3) they tend

to view their lack of equitable mobility with white Americans in the social system as reversible primarily through collective rather than individual action.

The primary feature of Ogbu's (1981c, 1981g) cultural ecological model is subsistence and its relationship to the emotional, psychological, economic and social makeup of a human population. Because he views subsistence as the primary symbol of status and self esteem in human populations, and hence far more than a cultural task designed to fulfill the biological needs associated with hunger, he postulates that populations whose subsistence tasks are disvalued in such social systems are likely to develop competencies which are reflective of that reality.

Therefore, Ogbu (1978, 1981c, 1981d) suggests that the disproportionately high rate of school failure among Black Americans is an "adaptation" to their limited social and economic opportunities--i.e., to Black ecological structure. Maintaining that Black school failure is, in effect, a fait accompli given the imperatives of the ecological structure, he dismisses other explanations of school failure. By cultural imperatives he means (a) the existence of a job ceiling which relegates Black Americans to low-status jobs which neither require much education nor bring high rewards for educational efforts; (b) substandard schooling based on white people's perceptions of the educational needs of Black Americans as well as the white control of Black education; (c) the survival strategies Black people have evolved as coping mechanisms under the job ceiling and other forms of subordination.

The cultural imperatives give rise, in turn, to factors which articulate with the educational experiences of Black children to cause the low school performance. For example, (1) the job ceiling gives rise to disillusionment about the real value of schooling, especially among older children, and

thereby discourages them from working hard in school; (2) frustrations over the job ceiling and substandard education create conflict and distrust between Black Americans and the schools, making it more difficult for Blacks than for whites to believe what the schools say and to behave according to school norms; (3) survival strategies or Black ways of coping, such as collective struggle, uncle tomming and hustling, may encourage Black Americans to develop attitudes, perceptions and behaviors or competencies that are not congruent with those required to do well in school; (4) the job ceiling and other discriminatory treatments engender among Black people a feeling of impotence and lack of self confidence that they can compete successfully with whites in matters they consider traditional white domains, such as good jobs and academic tests; and (5) the experience of slavery with its attendant "compulsory ignorance" means that Black Americans have had a limited academic tradition.

Ogbu suggests that the behaviors and attitudes and motivations of Black students, though different from those of white students, are not deviant or pathological, but should be considered as a mode of adaptation necessitated by their ecological structure or effective environment. That is, the attitudes, motivations and behaviors Black children learn in their community and bring to school are probably those required by and appropriate to the niche Black people occupy in the corporate economy and racial stratification system. Thus for Ogbu the low school performance of Black children stems from two facts: first, white people provide them with inferior education and treat them differentially in school; and second, Black people have developed ways of coping with limited opportunities and other mechanisms of subordination, strategies which are incompatible with striving for school success. Moreover, the childrearing formulae existing in the Black community, which are ultimately designed to make the child a competent adult, i.e., someone capable of

performing culturally prescribed tasks, incorporate this social reality. Additionally, Ogbu maintains that the schooling offered such social groups, as well as the schooling they come to seek, is influenced by the population's perception of their opportunity structure.

Ogbu's (1978) cultural ecological perspective, as initially proposed, is compelling. Nevertheless, as he himself later recognized, there are problems with it, the most salient being that it does not explain why, on the individual level, some Black children are successful on school measures of success in spite of the Black ecological structure (i.e., a pervasive job ceiling and inferior education). Like most other explanations, it focuses on Black school failure rather than on why some Black children succeed in school.

However, it should be pointed out here that since 1979, Ogbu has begun to look at secondary discontinuities, oppositional identities, and other cultural frames. Black American children, in Ogbu's (1982) view, are often victimized in the school setting by the existence of secondary discontinuities. These cultural differences negatively affect their school performance because they are reflective of a historical relationship between Black and white Americans in which Black Americans are the exploited group. In reaction to this pervasive exploitation, Black Americans have developed an alternative identity structure, one which highlights the oppositional features of Black and white Americans' social relations. Consequently, Black American culture tends to be more than just a different cultural system in the multiracial social system extant in the United States. Indeed, Ogbu (1982) suggests that the cultural system of Black Americans incorporates components which are in direct opposition to those of the dominant white group(s) (see also Fordham 1982b). These features--those in direct opposition to dominant-group cultural features--tend to be emotionally charged and resistant to change (see

Castile 1981; Castile and Kushner 1981; V. Green 1981; Spicer 1961, 1978, 1980).

In summary, in Ogbu's (1978, 1981a, 1981c, 1981g, 1982b, 1983a, 1984a, 1984b) earlier and later analyses, he postulates that the subsistence activities to which Black Americanshave been historically relegated are primordially influential in the school performance and academic achievement of Black American children. This is the result of both diachronic and synchronic subsistence activities. Additionally, it is the pervasive, persistent presence of a subsistence or job ceiling which caused the secondary discontinuities to emerge within the developing Black American cultural system and which is responsible for their continuing existence. Also, as Ogbu makes clear, secondary discontinuities tend to negatively affect the academic effort of the affected social group. This is particularly the case in the lower academic performance of today's Black adolescents.

The Fictive Kinship Model

The idea of fictive kinship as the symbol of Black Americans' emerging sense of peoplehood and therefore the principal articulator of Black Americans' social organization, is rooted in Ogbu's (1978, 1981c, 1981g, 1982) cultural ecological and secondary discontinuities analyses. More importantly, his theories were the incubator of the idea of fictive kinship as a possible explanation for the successful school performance of individual Black adolescents. My recent study in the District of Columbia Public Schools is a first attempt to study this question empirically. The central goal of the study was to look for the first time at the relationship of the ecological structure of Black Americans to the school performance of Black adolescents in the school context. However, it went beyond that relationship, seeking to explain

school achievement as well. This is important because Black people have consistently expressed a need to look at how Black children succeed in the school context.

One Black American cultural feature which has implications for many components of Black American life and culture, including school performance and behavior, is what this writer identifies as fictive kinship. Among anthropologists, the umbrella term "fictive kinship" is used when kinship terminology refers to people within the society to whom one is not necessarily related by birth (Bloch 1971; see also Brain 1972; Folb 1980:1-26; Fortes 1969:239-242; Freed 1963; Liebow 1967; Norbeck and Befu 1958; Pitt-Rivers 1968, 1973:90-91; Stack 1974; Staples 1981). However, as conceptualized in the study reported here, the anthropological definition of fictive kinship has been broadened to encompass the self-definition of an entire social group: Black Americans.

This component of Black American culture--fictive kinship--emerged in response to two features of their sociocultural reality: (1) the castelike relationship between Black and white Americans in which Black Americans were first slaves, then a cheap source of agricultural labor (Anderson 1972, 1975; Bullock 1967; Spivey 1978), later a cheap labor source for the industrialization of America (Anderson 1973, 1975; Bullock 1967; Spivey 1978), and, more recently, laborers in semiskilled jobs and careers in urbanized America (Drake and Cayton 1970); and (2) historically, the tendency of dominant-group Americans to see Black Americans as an undifferentiated mass of people to whom inherent strengths and, more importantly, inherent weaknesses are ascribed. Interestingly, in response to the structural limitations of the social system, this assumption of sameness among Black people became a critical identity symbol of Black culture, in that they <u>inverted</u> the negative assumptions of dominant-group Americans (Holt 1972; see also Fordham 1982; Ogbu 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b), thus aiding the emergence of a collective social self.

As operationally defined in this research, fictive kinship, Black Americans' group response to structural limitations in the social system, is a superordinate concept used to describe the symbol of group unity among Black Americans; it is a concept representing the emergence of a sense of peoplehood within the community. The concept is employed to delineate the tendency in the Black community to emphasize group loyalty, boundary maintenance, and a collective identity system, as well as the tendency to negatively sanction behaviors thought to be at variance with group symbols, cultural entities, etc. (see Fordham 1982a, 1982b; Ogbu 1982a, 1983a, 1983b). This sense of peoplehood is clearly evident in the use of kinship terms among group members. Examples of pseudo-kinship terms abound in the language of Black adolescents and adults: "brother", "sister", "soul brother", "soul sister", "blood", "bleed", "folks", "members", "the people", "my people" (see Folb 1980; Liebow 1967; Sargent 1985; Stack 1974).

More specifically, fictive kinship is used to describe the particular mind set, i.e., the specific world view of those persons who are appropriately labeled "Black". Since "Blackness" is more than a skin color, fictive kinship is the concept used to denote the moral judgment the group makes on its members (see Brain 1972). Essentially, the concept suggests that the mere possession of African features and/or being of African descent does not automatically make one a Black person, nor does it suggest that one is a member in good standing of the group. One can be black in color, but choose not to seek membership in the fictive kinship system, and/or be denied membership by the group because one's behavior, activities, and lack of manifest loyalty are at variance with those thought to be appropriate and group-specific.

On the other hand, because <u>only</u> Black Americans are involved in the evaluation of group members' eligibility for membership, the criteria used

to judge one's worthiness for membership are totally group-specific. Consequently, unlike the criteria for promotion in the workplace or the grades one earns in school, the criteria for membership in the fictive kinship system in the Black community are controlled and determined solely by Black Americans. Fictive kinship is the ideal by which all members of the group are judged, as well as the instrument used to distinguish the real members of the group from those who are "spurious" (Williams 1981a) and not what they appear to be (see Castile 1981; Napper 1973; Poussaint and McLean 1968; Spicer 1961, 1971, 1980, 1981). It is anchored in, but actually transcends, specific genealogical criteria. Theoretically, fictive kinship is symbolic of an immutable relationship of group solidarity and anchorage, or what Cohen (1964) has aptly labeled "sociological interdependence".

The emotional identification which ensures the survival of the group results from the dominant group's forcing onus on every Black American for the actions and deeds of all other Black Americans. The following example can be offered to illustrate what is meant by this claim. The "insurrection" of Nat Turner (see Haley 1976; Styron 1966) in 1831 in Southampton, Virginia, led to massive restriction of (1) movement and (2) intragroup contact of peoples of African descent regardless of where they lived in America as well as their clear lack of involvement in the "insurrection". This was done despite the fact that these children (1) had traditionally attended mixed Sabbath schools in the city and (2) were in no way involved in the "insurrection" led by Nat Turner. Thus, onus for Turner's behavior was extended to all Black Americans based not on their culpability but rather on one common feature they shared with Turner: skin color. It was this kind of arbitrary, irrational response on the part of white Americans to the individual acts of

particular Black Americans which fostered the development of the group response that is here labeled "fictive kinship".

Therefore, fictive kinship is suggested as the principal articulator of Black Americans' social relationships. It is argued here that, as the quintessential symbol of their sense of peoplehood, fictive kinship leads to pronounced boundary-maintaining behaviors among Black Americans. However, as Cohen (1964) notes, emotional identification with one's primary group is a relative phenomenon, i.e., the degree to which the individual feels one with his/her group must, of necessity, be distinguished from the individual's personal assessment of who he/she is. The awareness of "self" as a separate entity from the group, as Cohen makes clear, is necessary because the complete fusion of the "self" with the group is neither possible nor desirable. Hence, there is an urgent need to look at individual differences within Black American society despite the general tendency toward fictive kinship, i.e., "sociological interdependence".

The existence of fictive kinship within the community suggests that Black Americans have come to see themselves as more than just a race of people; they have come to see themselves as an "enduring" people (see Castile 1981; V. Green 1981; Ogbu 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b; Spicer 1961, 1978, 1980, 1981) with clearly identifiable attitudes, behaviors, and a stock of symbols that, "together with their meanings, concerning their experience as a people . . . , constitute their collective identity" (Spicer 1980:347).

The point being stressed here is that this lack of individual differentiation from both outside and within the group suggests an alternative explanation for the school performance and academic achievement of Black adolescents--namely, fictive kinship.

In summary, fictive kinship reflects the shared oppressive conditions Black Americans presently experience and/or have inherited. In short, it is their strategy for coping with the power of white America. This evolved response, i.e., fictive kinship, is taught to children, often unconsciously, by their parents and other members of the Black community at a very early age as part of the children's enculturation process. Consequently, it is argued that Black children learn to associate their life chances and their "success" potential with that of their Black classmates in a way that may not be true for other children. Group membership is paramount in their peer relationships--so much so that these social relationships are frequently based on criteria associated with kin-relationships; i.e., my brother is my brother regardless of what he does (Cohen 1971:25; see also Haskins 1975; Sargent 1985). A discussion of the effects of the existence of a fictive kinship system on Black adolescents' response to school achievement is considered in the next section.

III. COPING WITH SCHOOL SUCCESS--A REVIEW

The paucity of literature on Black adolescents' school achievement makes it difficult to document how Black adolescents have coped with the "burden of acting white". Nevertheless, the information which is available suggests that "acting white" is fraught with conflict, ambivalence and, in many instances, a sense of estrangement from the source of one's identification--the Black fictive kinship system.

As indicated above (see Part II), the Black American cultural system tends to be characterized by an inordinate emphasis on group advancement over and beyond the individualistic orientation characteristic of the dominant social system (see Fordham 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b; Ogbu 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b; Weis 1985). This becomes problematic in the

school context for several reasons, including (as noted by Ogbu 1983a, 1983b, 1984a, 1984b; and Fordham 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1984a; see also Weis 1985), the fact that Black American culture is not just different from that of the dominant cultural system, but it is in many ways a culture in opposition to that of the dominant system.

As a result of the long-term subordination of Black people in the United States, Black Americans tend to define themselves in opposition to their white counterparts. This means that in many instances what is perceived as appropriate for white Americans is defined by Black Americans as inappropriate for them. The following examples from the existing literature illuminate how this phenomenon is played out in the school and community contexts.

Al is a student in a recently desegregated high school--Plains High--in a midwestern city, whose high academic performance on school measures of success resulted in his assignment to advanced placement courses at the school. Most of the students in such classes are white. In fact, he acknowledges that he is the only Black student in many of the classes he takes. Having previously attended an all-Black school, he is very much aware of the pressures and problems associated with high academic achievement among his Black peers:

> They don't want to change. They want me to be just like them. . . . I'm trying very hard to get away from black people. When I was in that all [Black] school, of course, my friends were all [Black]. But I don't have any more [Black] friends right now. I live in a [Black] area, but I don't even talk to anybody who lives near me. I wanted to find out what white people were all about. So when I went to high school, I tried to make new friends and get away from the black people as much as possible. . . . I've tried to maintain an image of myself in the school--getting away from those people. I work, and I buy my own clothes, and I study hard. In fact, I have all 'A's in my classes and I'm in many of the white activities, like Speech--the only [Black person] in the whole group. . . . The only other thing I fear is the toughies at school. I don't argue with them at all although sometimes it's hard because, if

> you try to avoid an argument, they say you're conceited (cited in Petroni and Hirsch 1970:12,20).

In another example from the same high school, Petroni and Hirsch (1970) describe Pat's dilemma in this integrated context where she appears to be unlike the other Black students in the school. While Petroni and Hirsch (1970) acknowledge that Pat receives pressure from both Black and white students, they cite her as having indicated that the greater pressure comes from other Black students.

> I [feel] the greatest pressure from members of my own race. I'm an all 'A' student; I'm always on the honor roll; I'm in Madrigals, and so on. Because of these small accomplishments, there's a tendency for the [Blacks] to think that I'm better than they are. They think I'm boasting. Take Nancy--Nancy ran for office, and I've heard other [Black students] say, 'She thinks she's so good.' I don't think of it this way. These small accomplishments that I've achieved aren't just for me, but they're to help the Black cause. I do things for my race, not just for myself. Most of the time, though, I don't pay too much attention to these kids. It's just a small percentage of [Blacks] anyway, who're the trouble makers, and they resent the fact that I'm doing something, and they aren't (cited in Petroni and Hirsch 1970:20).

Margaret, another successful student at Plains High, is described as having become bitter because she thinks discrimination from the <u>white</u> segment of the school has become a major impediment to her academic success.

> I've learned I can get along with white kids. But one [other] thing I've learned is to be bitter. That's right--bitter. The first discrimination I've felt was at Plains High. After three years of junior high school, where I sat on top, and the majority of the kids were [Black], there was a rude awakening to go to Plains High School. Even though you have the merit to back you up, merit is not enough, and I've found that out at Plains High. . . . This is a fact of reality. I've had to learn to face this reality at Plains High for the first time. There were things I couldn't do because I'm [Black]. . . . If you're [Black], you have to try extra hard, and I have. . . . I'm still a student at Plains High, and I know at Plains High color will make a difference. This is reality. But I also

> know that they have got to learn to live with it, and so do I (cited in Petroni and Hirsch 1970:40-41).

In a series of articles on adolescents' school behavior in a predominantly white suburban school system near Washington, D.C., Elsa Walsh (1984) highlights the special problems of high-achieving Black students in that county school system, especially the paralyzing effects of coping with the "burden of 'acting white'". In her discussion of "K", a thirteen-year-old, academically gifted female student, Walsh describes K's feeling of loneliness and isolation in the predominantly white honors courses to which she was assigned. She also points out how the Black students' rejection of K and their often-repeated accusations that she (K) was "stuck up" and thought she was "too good for them", as well as her white classmates' doubts about her actual ability to do the work in the honors courses, eroded her confidence. This growing lack of confidence and the internal conflict about where she belonged was K's response to her Black and white peers' perception of her, despite the fact that she has consistently performed well on standardized examinations and "makes mostly A's in her subjects."

In still another example of how Black adolescents in predominantly white and/or "integrated" contexts cope with the burden of "acting white", Gray (1985) describes the futility of efforts to minimize her "Blackness" through academic excellence in a predominantly white school and community context:

> . . . no matter how refined my speech, or how well educated or assimiliated [sic.] I become, I fear I will always be an outsider. I'm almost like a naturalized alien--in this place but not of it. . . .
>
> During my pompous period, I dealt with my insecurities by wearing a veil of superiority. Except around my family and neighbors, I played the role--the un-black.
>
> To whites, I tried to appear perfect--I earned good grades and spoke impeccable English, was well-mannered and well-groomed. Poor whites, however, made me nervous. They seldom concealed their contempt for blacks, especially 'uppity' ones like myself. . . .

> To blacks, I was all of the above and extremely stuck up. I pretended not to see them on the street, spoke to them only when spoken to and cringed in the presence of blacks being loud in front of whites. The more integrated my Catholic grammar school became, the more uncomfortable I was there. I had heard white parents on TV, grumbling about blacks ruining their schools; I didn't want anyone to think that I, too, might bring down Sacred Heart Academy. So I behaved, hoping that no one would associated [sic.] me with 'them' (Gray 1985:E1,E5).

While all of the above examples of the difficulties associated with academic excellence occurred in integrated or predominantly white contexts, the following examples, taken from predominantly Black contexts, indicate that school 'knowledge is perceived as 'not ours'--it is white, not black'" (Weis 1985:102). This perception, i.e., academic "'excellence means being kind of white'," negatively affects school performance in predominantly Black contexts as well.

> I got there [Holy Providence School in Cornwall Heights, right outside of Philadelphia] and immediately found I could read better than anyone in the school. My father's example and my mother's training had made that come easy; I could pick up a book, read it out loud, pronounce the words with the proper inflections and actually know what they meant. When the nuns found this out they paid me a lot of attention, once even asking me, a fourth grader, to read to the seventh grade. When the kids found this out I became a target. . . .
>
> It was my first time away from home, my first experience in an all-black situation, and I found myself being punished for doing everything I'd ever been taught was right. I got all A's and was hated for it; I spoke correctly and was called a punk. I had to learn a new language simply to be able to deal with the threats. I had good manners and was a good little boy and paid for it with my hide (Abdul-Jabbar 1983:16).

In still another example of "coping with the burden of 'acting white'" in a predominantly Black context, Sargent (1985), a journalist for The Washington Post, who attended public school in Washington, D.C., notes how he used his emerging sense of Blackness to minimize the conflict usually

associated with academic excellence among Black students. In fact, unlike any of the other examples cited here, he attributes his strong sense of identity as a Black person, encapsulated in the existing fictive kinship system, as a primary buffer against the sense of alienation which is often associated with school success for Black adolescents:

> While I had always been a good student, I became a better one, as a result of my sense of black history. I began to notice that my public-school teachers very rarely mentioned black contributions to the sciences, math and other areas of study. . . . They never talked about ways blacks could collectively use their education to solve the great economic and social problems facing the race.
>
> My mind was undergoing a metamorphosis that made the world change its texture. Everything became relevant because I knew blacks had made an impact on all facets of life. I felt a part of things that most blacks thought only white people had a claim to [my emphasis]. Knowing that there is serious speculation that Beethoven was black--a mullato [sic.]--made me enjoy classical music. 'Man, why do you listen to that junk? That's white music,' my friends would say. 'Wrong. Beethoven was a brother.' I was now bicultural, a distinction most Americans could not claim. I could switch from boogie to rock, from funk to jazz and from rhythm-and-blues to Beethoven and Bach. . . . I moved from thinking of myself as disadvantaged to realizing that I was actually 'super-advantaged' (Sargent 1985:D1,D4).

Hence Sargent (1985) attributes his greater ability to deal with the perception of "acting white" to his broader sense of Black American history which he acquired outside the school context. His unusual effort to learn more about Black Americans' contribution to the American society was, in his view, primarily influential in enabling him to cope with the "burden of acting white".

In all of the examples cited from the existing literature, the common theme is one which highlights the tension which exists when the Black child attempts to move away from the safety and security of the "collectivity" (Weis 1985), i.e., the fictive kinship system, to the strange and foreign "individualistic" setting of the larger social system. The next section of the

paper presents a description of how the successful students at Capital High--the setting of the author's research--cope with the "burden of acting white".

IV. "Acting White" at Capital High

Elsewhere (Fordham 1982b, 1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1985a) I have described in great detail the Capital High Community, including its social conditions, its people, and their social and economic life. Suffice it to say here that Capital High, the research site, is a predominantly Black high school--about 99 percent Black--in a historically Black section of Washington, D.C. According to the D.C. Public Schools' official statistics, Capital had a total school population of 1,886 students--of whom 1,868 were Black--as of October 14, 1982, a month after the research effort began.

The school is located in a predominantly Black section of the city. Most of the students come from one-parent homes; many of them live in public or low-income housing. Their parents' lack of earning power makes them eligible for either the free or the reduced lunch program. In fact, according to the official school data submitted to the Superintendent's Office, of the nearly 2,000 students at the school in November of 1982, almost 500 (480), about one-fourth of the student body, were eligible for the federally subsidized free lunch program. An additional 375 were eligible for the reduced lunch program. In summary, the research setting is characterized by students whose parents' education, income and social status make them poor, and whose perceptions of their future status could be adequately described as bleak or small (see deLone 1979).

School success at Capital High can be generally described as being fraught with the following salient characteristics: (1) avoidance (see Howard and Hammond 1985) and conflict--avoidance of those activities and courses which

might suggest that the individual views the schooling process as more than an obligatory rite of passage; (2) fear of being identified as a brainiac and subsequently found lacking in some important academic skill or behavior; and (3) persistent "imposter feelings" which suggest that keeping a low profile in order to achieve defined goals and/or to mute the inevitable yet pervasive "vertical hostility" endemic in the school.

Ethnographic data obtained from the small sample of students involved in the research during the base year of the study--1982--are the bases for the perceptions which inform the analysis which follows. Thirty-three 11th-grade students participated in the study. For this presentation, data from 24 of these students--12 males, 6 underachieving and 6 high-achieving, and 12 females, 6 high- and 6 underachieving--were analyzed. Gender was found to be a critical variable in Black students' school success, tending to outweigh class as a factor in this area (see Hare 1979). Consequently, this brief analysis will give some attention to sex-specific responses to the "fear of acting white".

Both categories of students appear to be negatively affected by the ambivalence towards success existing in the Black community. For the underachieving students--males and females--, the decision regarding success appears to be "avoidance"; i.e., they have consciously and unconsciously decided to avoid efforts which might suggest that they desire to act in ways which are often identified with white Americans.

A. The Underachieving Students

The following examples from the underachieving students--males and females--are indicative of how most of the students at Capital High cope with the "burden of acting white". Sidney is a case in point.

Sidney, an outstanding football player, appears to be encapsulated in the very forces which he maintains are largely responsible for the lack of upward mobility in the Capital Community. He is very much aware of the need to earn good grades in school in order to get the limited opportunities which are available to Black Americans. However, like most of the other students, he appears to be unable to take control of his life and act in opposition to the forces which he identifies as being detrimental to his academic success. He is surprised and disgusted with his inability to earn grades comparable to those he earned in elementary and junior high school. While Sidney takes most of the courses available to 11th graders from the Advanced Placement sequence at the school, he is not making the As and Bs at Capital that he consistently made during his earlier schooling. Unlike the high-achieving male students who participated in the research study, Sidney does not limit his friends to students who are, like him, taking mostly courses in the AP sequence for 11th grade students. Sidney's friends are primarily football players and other athletes. He is able to mix and mingle easily with them despite the fact that he takes advanced courses, primarily, he claims, because of his status as an athlete. His friends are all aware of his decision to take these courses, and they jokingly refer to him as "Mr. Advanced Placement".

Like most of the other students who are part of the research study, Sidney took the PSAT this past fall and did fairly well on both components of the exam. On the math component of the test, he scored at the 67th percentile; on the verbal component, he scored at the 54th percentile. He performed as well as he did despite the fact that he has a grade point average of "C". Apparently, Sidney did not take the CTBS exam this year. However, his scores on the same exam in the 9th grade showed him to be performing well above grade

level, if overall grade equivalent as measured by this exam is accurate. His composite score in reading was 12.2; he scored at the college level on the language component (13.6); on the math component he scored just above 11th grade (11.3), making his total battery on these three components 11.8. In the remaining sections he scored above college level in the reference skills, science and social studies. Interestingly, his performance on these standardized measures is far higher than that of many of the high-achieving males in the sample. Moreover, Sidney readily acknowledges that he could do a lot better in school, but he, like many of his friends, does not value what he is asked to learn in the school context. Also, as he reluctantly admitted, the fear of being known as a "brainiac" limits his academic effort. According to Sidney, the term "brainiac" is used in a disparaging manner at Capital.

Anthro:[1] Have you heard the word 'brainiac' used here?
Sidney: Yes. [When referring to students who take the Advanced Placement courses here.] That's a term for the smartest person in class. Brainiac--jerk--you know, those terms. If you're smart, you're a jerk, you're a brainiac.
Anthro: Are all those words synonyms?
Sidney: Yes.
Anthro: So it's not a positive [term]?
Sidney: No, it's a negative [term], as far as brilliant academic students are concerned.
Anthro: Why is that?
Sidney: That's just the way the school population is.

Sidney is not able to clearly articulate why the students at Capital respond to academic effort in a negative way; nevertheless, he goes on to intimate that it is related directly to the widespread lack of opportunity in the Capital Community and the Black community at large. He indicates that this reality distorts the perception of individual members of the community and this perception spreads throughout the community and the school.

---

[1]Anthropologist

While, as noted above, Sidney takes most of the Advanced Placement courses available to 11th grade students at the school, he admits that he works at developing a persona which will nullify any claim that he is a "brainiac".

> Anthro: . . . Has anyone ever called you a [brainiac]?
> Sidney: Brainiac? No.
> Anthro: Why not?
> Sidney: Well, I haven't given them a reason to. And, too, well, I don't excel in all my classes like I should be--that's another reason. . . . I couldn't blame it on the environment. I have to blame it on myself--for partaking in the environment. But I can tell you that--going back to what we were talking about--another reason why they don't call me 'brainiac', because I'm an athlete.
> Anthro: . . . So . . . if a kid is smart, for example, one of the ways to limit the negative reaction to him or her, and his or her brilliance, is . . . .
> Sidney: Yeah, do something extracurricular in the school . . . [like] being an athlete, cheerleader squad, in the band--like that. . . . Yeah, something that's important, that has something to do with--that represents your school (Formal Interview, March 17, 1983: 40-41).

Not surprisingly, Sidney went on to tell me that the fear of being known as a "brainiac" has negatively affected his academic effort in the school context "a great deal". Indeed, the fear of being discovered as an "imposter" among his friends, leads him to carefully choose even those persons with whom he will interact within the classroom context; all of the males with whom he interacts who also take Advanced Placement courses are, like him, primarily concerned with "mak[ing] it over the hump."

He attributes his lack of greater effort in school to his lack of will power and time on task. In fact, he appears to be confused by his sudden and drastic change from an Honor Roll student in junior high school to his mediocre school performance at Capital. However, unlike many of his peers, he is at least able to acknowledge that his lower performance on school measures of

success is the result of greater emphasis on athletic achievements and his emerging manhood, and less emphasis on the core curriculum at school. He does not study, and spends very little time completing homework assignments. In fact, he observes that his homework effort is limited to the short time period between the time he gets up in the morning and gets dressed for school, and the time when his mother puts breakfast on the table: about fifteen minutes. Sidney is not proud of his lack of effort in the school context but, as indicated above, he does not appear to be able to change the direction of his life in the school context. Moreover, Sidney's desire not to be known as a "brainiac" is circumscribing his future in ways which are not fully understood and appreciated by him.

Still another example of how the underachieving male students at Capital "cope with the burden of acting white" is the case of Max, another football player, who puts brakes on his academic effort. Like Sidney, Max takes most of his courses from the Advanced Placement courses available to 11th grade students. However, unlike Sidney, who sought to come to Capital because of the advanced courses he would be able to take, Max takes these courses because his parents, particularly his mother, insist that he take them.

Like most of the other students who are participants in the research study, Max's school performance record is fraught with inconsistencies. As he readily acknowledges, his grades in school, at all levels, have been largely Cs, with a small number of Bs and very few As. His grades at Capital have fallen from their earlier low. For example, during his first year at the school, he earned two Fs, two Ds, one C, and one A. Interestingly, despite his rather marginal performance in the school context, he scored higher than many of the high-achieving males on the PSAT, scoring at the 58th percentile

on the verbal component, and at the 52nd percentile on the math component of the exam.

Max's future career goals are both tentative and ambivalent. He loves astronomy, and if he thought he could be successful as an astronomer, he would pursue that specialization as a lifetime career. The problem, however, is that he does not feel that he will be able to find a job in that specialty. Also, because of the cumulative effect of his lowered academic effort, he is not sure that, even if he started to put forth all the effort he is capable of at this point, he would be successful in even gaining admittance to a college offering that specialty either as an undergraduate major or a graduate degree program. Therefore, he has decided to settle on:

> . . . dealing with engineering, constructional work, or designing, or--you know, just hold down a job in investing--making wise investments, and . . . yes, financial investments (Formal Interview, March 18, 1983:53).

Max's definition of success incorporates the idea that he "beat the odds" because he views the opportunity structure as being "fixed" so that Black Americans cannot achieve the same degree of success as their white counterparts. Moreover, another component of Max's idea of success is the ability to prove to those who believe that as a Black male he comes tarnished, that he is "capable, . . . reliable [and] trustworthy."

Max, more than many of the other students, appears to have a much greater understanding of the forces at work in determining the social position of Black Americans, and how his perception of these limitations affect his school performance and his perception of the opportunities available to him--a Black American male. In fact, his life appears to be a living example of those forces.

As I listened to this student's responses to the questions posed, and heard him talk about his life experiences, I was struck by the tenacity with which he seeks to remain encapsulated in the Black community. This is his response in spite of his mother's constant efforts to shake him free of the self-imposed restraints. Interestingly, he uses his putative middle class advantage to minimize the harm which might befall his friends, and since his friends are critically important to him and his sense of identity, he refuses to forgo his relationship with them even for school success. Indeed, he seems to feel that his friends, who he sees as being quite different from himself--i.e., they are not middle class--are nevertheless critically important to him. When he looks backward from his position in school today, he observes with a mounting sense of sadness:

> You know, I just sacrificed a whole lot out of myself, what I could do, just to make my friends happy, you know. And it never--it just didn't work. They--you know, all of them didn't take advantage of me. They really didn't bother--it bothered me, but it wasn't that they were all trying to just take advantage of me, it was just that, you know, sometimes then I got my mind--you know, I just got--I'd get myself psyched out, worrying about what other people thought of me. But it really doesn't matter all that much, any more. Not as much as it did then. I guess that's just growing up (Formal Interview, March 11, 1983:36).

Ironically, he goes on to point out some of the important ways he is different from his friends whose friendships he values so strongly:

> We don't <u>think</u> the <u>same</u>, me and my friends. That's why I used to think that I wasn't--I used to think that I wasn't--I used to always put myself down, <u>that I wasn't good enough</u> [author's emphasis]. Because I could--the things they'd want to do, I didn't want to do because I knew it was wrong, and that I wouldn't get anything out of it. And, really, a cheap thrill isn't really all that much to <u>me</u>--really it isn't. It's just not worth it, you know. Why go through the trouble? So--that's just the way I think. I used to try and change it, but it didn't work . . . not for me, it didn't, anyways (Formal Interview, March 11, 1983:34).

Max is also aware of the constant assault to his personal self esteem that such an approach to life entails. Nevertheless, his desire to be acceptable to his friends whose families' income, housing conditions, internal relationships, etc., are generally much worse than his, has made and continues to make him fearful of being unacceptable to them.

> Like my friends at home--all right, they used to seriously think I was--I wasn't dumb to them, but I let them get away with everything, because, like, I didn't want to lose my friends. Like, we, that was before I got my car. I always knew sometimes they were taking advantage of me, but I didn't do anything about it, it'll either get worse, or they'd say, well, you know, 'Just forget it' (Formal Interview, March 11, 1983:35).

He also notes the necessary role playing which is so critical to his survival. For him, role playing means understating his level of intelligence and insight. In fact, he argues that the role he has played over the years has become so much a part of him that he is forced at different junctures to say to himself that he must snap out of the socially constructed persona. This role--limiting his academic effort and performance--is so much a part of who he is seen to be that Max claims that it is "something like a split personality, kind of, but it isn't."

In summary, this portrait of Max suggests that he is so immersed in the identity that he has created for himself that even he is sometimes uncertain about which of the many personae he has constructed is really he. He is torn between his knowledge of the limitations in the opportunity structure directed at Black American males and his understanding of the need to "be twice as good to go half as far" as a white American in the opportunity structure. It is this conflict and uncertainty which is responsible for his diminished effort in the school context.

The following examples of how the female underachievers cope with the "burden of acting white" at Capital High further document how these students' perceptions of the opportunity structure affect their school performance and behavior.

Shelvy is an underachieving student who is more aware than many of her peers of why she is not performing as well in the classroom context as she could and perhaps should. She is keenly aware of her peers' concurrent "embracement and rejection" of school norms and behaviors. In that sense, she realizes that seeking school success at Capital High is immersed in a boundary-maintaining cultural context. It is the boundary-maintaining tendency of her peers which negatively sanctions behaviors which are associated with the label "brainiac" which has negatively affected Shelvy's school performance. Her fear of being labeled "brainiac" and burdened with all of the expectations attendant thereto, has led her to resort to lowering her effort in the school and classroom context.

Perhaps more than any of the other underachieving females, Shelvy's academic performance reflects the pain and frustration associated with trying to camouflage one's abilities from her peers. Having been a "good" student in elementary school, she knows firsthand how difficult it is to extricate oneself from the suffocating stranglehold of peers whose priorities in the school context do not necessarily include academic excellence. Her fear of academic excellence is readily apparent when one observes her in the classroom context. When she is called upon by her teachers, she is able to respond quickly and correctly. However, having learned from the negative experiences associated with academic excellence in elementary and junior high school, she has learned to put "brakes" on her academic effort in the school context.

In elementary school, her grades were mostly "VGs, As, Bs and stuff like that" (Formal Interview, March 7, 1983:7). Despite the resistance to academic excellence she experienced in the two elementary and two junior high schools (all in the Capital Community) she attended prior to coming to Capital, she has persisted in her efforts to obtain good grades in school. In fact, she maintains that in the second junior high she attended, she was placed in the only honors section of the 9th grade at the school. This decision made it much easier for her to persist in her goal because everybody in that section had been identified as a potentially good student.

> I went to Garden [Junior High School]. That was fairly well, but in the 8th grade I had the problem of the same thing--everybody saying, 'Well, she thinks she's smart,' and all this. I had the same problem in the 8th grade. But in the 9th grade, they placed me in a all-academic section and, you know, everyone in there was smart, so it wasn't recognized--they recognized everybody as being a smart section, instead of a individual (Formal Interview, March 7, 1983:10).

She made the Honor Roll during both her 8th and 9th grade years. Indeed, this pattern of academic excellence continued at Capital during her 10th grade year, when she earned two Bs (AP English II and Typing I); two As (Lab Science and French I); and two Cs (Health and Physical Education and Geometry I).

Her performance on standardized measures supports her teachers' evaluation of her academic skills. On the CTBS, which she took in the spring of her 11th grade year, her composite score on the three major areas--reading, language and mathematics--was the highest overall grade equivalent (OGE) possible, 13.6. Shelvy did not take the PSAT which was offered in the fall. Because she assumes that she will not be able to go to college (her parents are very poor) and therefore did not see any value in trying to convince her parents, particularly her mother, to give her the five dollars needed to pay for the exam, she opted to bypass it. Hence, there is no way of determining how

well she would have performed vis-a-vis the other students who took that exam.

Surprisingly, despite her history of academic excellence and her above-average performance on the above-identified standardized measures of school success, she is receiving virtually no attention and encouragement to exceed her present level of achievement. The reason for this is not quite clear. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Shelvy is keenly aware of the boundary-maintaining propensity within the Black community and among her peers. It is the fear of the resentment of her peers which has adversely affected her school performance. She has been carefully taught to avoid success or engaging in behaviors and activities that could be labeled "acting white". Her first contact with the notion of success as a risky task began early in her school career, but probably came to full fruition during the 6th grade when, for the first time in her life, she heard the word "brainiac" used when referring to her. While she maintains that ideally everybody, i.e., all of her peers, want to be brainiacs, they are paralyzed with the fear that if they perform well in school they will be discovered, and with that discovery comes the responsibility to share knowledge with those persons who are not as proficient in school, either because they are unwilling to put forth the necessary effort and/or they deliberately choose not to put forth the effort because they expect the "brainiac" to share their knowledge with them.

> In the sixth grade, it was me and these two girls, we used to hang together all the time. They used to say we was brainiacs, and no one really liked us. . . . It's not something--well, it's something that you want to be, <u>but you don't want your friends to know</u> [my emphasis]. . . . Because once they find out you're a brainiac, then the first thing they'll say is, 'Well, she thinks she cute, and she thinks she smart, she thinks she's better than anyone else.' So what most brainiacs do, they sit back and they know an answer, and they won't answer it. . . . 'Cause, see, first thing everybody say, 'Well, they're

> trying to show off.' So they really don't--they might answer once in a while, but. . . . Because if you let . . . all your friends know how smart you are, then when you take a test or something, then they're going to know you know the answers and they're going to want the answers. And if you don't give them to them, then they're going to get upset with you (Formal Interview, March 7, 1983:7).

When asked how their being upset would be manifested, Shelvy replied, "Well, they might start rumors about you, might give you a bad name or something like that."

Shelvy's analysis of the dilemma of the brainiac clearly suggests that the high-achieving student's lot in life is one fraught with conflict and ambivalence. The fear of being identified and labeled a brainiac presents a unique set of problems which tends to lead to social isolation and a social self (Henry 196) which is damaged by negative perceptions of the individual so identified. Essentially, Shelvy claims that a student who is identified as a "brainiac" is more vulnerable to "social death" than those who do not seek the label and/or who are able to assiduously avoid being so identified.

Shelvy notes a similar response of Black Americans to "acting white" behaviors in the home and family settings. She feels that being identified as smart or a brainiac in any context, is negatively sanctioned in the Black community. For example, in her home, among her immediate family, each family member tends to have high expectations for her and even view her as being "smart", a label she despises for some of the reasons discussed in the school context. Shelvy feels particularly uncomfortable with one of her female cousins who is about her age:

> But I don't like [for] my uncle to believe in me, 'cause he has a daughter--well, she's not really his daughter, but he's been with her mother for about thirteen years--, and she envies me, for some reason. And it's like he pays more attention to me than he does to her. And she catches a attitude behind it. And now when I see her, she don't really speak--I'll speak to her, but . . . .

> I will not go over to my uncle's house [any more], he will come to my house. I don't go over there 'cause, you know, I feel as though I'm not wanted, and I always feel [when] you not wanted, you should stay away (Formal Interview, March 8, 1983:47).

It is clear that in both the home and school contexts, being viewed as different is riddled with conflict and stress. This is the case despite the fact that in these two different contexts the form this conflict and ambivalence takes is quite different: in the school context, academic excellence is not supported by Shelvy's peer group unless she or any other student so inclined is willing to share his or her superior knowledge with them as they need it--i.e., using one's knowledge to support the group's advancement; in the home context, where parents and other family members are extremely supportive, other similarly aged peers who are not doing as well academically often come to resent their more academic-oriented relatives, withdrawing support and friendship. The pervasiveness of these boundary-maintaining experiences is in many ways responsible for Shelvy's slowly diminishing effort in the school context.

Similarly, Kaela, another member of the underachieving female sample group, has learned to lower her performance in the school context because of the uncertainty and ambivalence which swirls around academic excellence in the school context for Black adolescents. Kaela is an underachieving student at Capital taking most of her courses from the regular curriculum offerings at the school. Her underachievement is primarily the result of a lack of school attendance. She is a new student--first year--to Capital, having received all of her earlier schooling in the elementary, junior and one year of high school in the Catholic schools in the Washington, D.C., area. Additionally, her cumulative record from these schools suggests that she was a

very good student who was also well behaved. Indeed, during her 9th grade year at her former high school, she earned high honors and received a full scholarship.

While Kaela came to realize that she was capable of performing on the same level as her predominantly white counterparts, the treatment of other Black students--with whom she strongly identified--caused her to experience a latent but pervasive anger which, as she acknowledged, affected her academic performance in a very negative way. After she lost her supportive friendship base at the end of her 9th grade year, her grades plummeted during her 10th grade year because she began to form friendships with girls whose primary objective was not academic excellence. She failed a primary subject--English--and decided to enroll in Capital this past fall because she did not feel comfortable at any more. Kaela maintains that the way the other Black students were treated at her former parochial school led her to question the "appropriateness" of her high academic effort and achievement; she came to view herself as being perceived by the school's administrators and teachers as deserving the same discriminatory treatment which, in her mind, was linked directly to their Blackness. Since she too is a Black person, she began to seriously limit her school effort and could not be persuaded by her teachers to believe that she was unlike the other Black students at the school--an exception to the rule.

Kaela's performance at Capital is quite mixed. Currently, she is taking English III (she took English II in summer school and passed with a grade of B), Typing I, Sewing/Clothing, Computer Literacy (she has just begun to take this course; it replaces the Life Skills course she took last semester), Biology I, and U.S. History.

Like most of the other students at Capital, Kaela did not take the PSAT this fall, so it is not one of the measures which could be used to assess her academic performance; nor did she take the CTBS this spring (she was probably not at school that day). However, she did take the Life Skills Exam, and her performance was phenomenally good. Like Katrina, she had a perfect score on that standardized measure required of all 11th graders by the D.C. Public Schools.

Moreover, all of her teachers acknowledge that her ability to do the work required in their classes exceeds that of most of the other students. Nevertheless, she failed or nearly failed all of her major courses the first semester. Her English teacher was pleased with her ability to do the work when she was in school, but her lack of attendance made it virtually impossible for her to pass her. Likewise, her History teacher was forced to give her a failing grade, even though she passed the semester exam with a score of 88, because she had been absent from class so often. Since these were the only two core courses she took during the first semester, having been allowed to eliminate all math classes from her schedule, this is the only standardized barometer of her academic ability while at Capital High.

Unlike her teachers, who insist on viewing her as being an individual decontextualized from the racial history of Black people in America, Kaela sees herself first and foremost as a Black person, and it is her growing sense of identity as a Black person which has negatively affected her school performance. She appears to be convinced that the opportunities for Black Americans are "small" (deLone 1979). Kaela views her personal future as being very "small" for three critical reasons: (1) she is a Black American; (2) her family is very poor and will not be able to financially support her higher academic aspirations; and (3) she feels that the competition for the

most highly valued positions in schools, the workplace, etc., is too keen, making her a certain loser. Therefore she, like many of the other students at Capital, has put brakes on her effort in order to minimize the frustration associated with being overly qualified for the low-status jobs, etc., to which she will be relegated in the future.

She applies this same logic to explain the lower achievement motive among Black American students, especially those attending Capital High. Essentially, her argument is that the students' perception of an opportunity structure which is virtually closed to them and/or judges them primarily on the basis of their social group membership tends to diminish the students' academic perseverance and achievement. At the time of this interview session, the students were in the process of completing their desired schedule of classes during the coming academic year--their senior year. She describes how the students' perception of the lack of jobs and opportunities in the social structure influences their choices in the selection of courses, etc.:

> [The students at Capital High would try harder to make good grades in school if they thought they had a real chance.] I know that. Because I've heard a lot of people say--okay, we're filling out our schedules now. And they say, 'Well, I don't know why I'm taking all these hard classes. I ain't never going to see this stuff again in my life! Why am I going to sit up here and make my record look bad, trying to take all these hard classes and get bad grades? I ain't going to need this stuff! I'm just going to take what I need to get my diploma! Forget all that other stuff!' And, you know, I thought like that for a while, too. But it's not the right way. I mean, we should try to better ourselves in any possible way. But a lot of people don't think that way (Formal Interview, April 22, 1983:22).

As indicated above, the primary reason Kaela is failing the courses she is currently taking at Capital is because she is repeatedly absent from school. Given that salient reason for her underachievement, I tried to get

her to offer some explanation for her refusal to come to school on a daily basis, as well as some reason why she thought this was such a common practice among Black students at Capital.

> I don't really know why. I don't even know why I don't come, when I know I should come. It's just that we [Black students] don't have that much support. We don't get--I know we know that we should do things, but it's--you know, you need somebody pushing you. And when you don't have that, sometimes you feel like nobody cares, so why should you care? It gets like that sometimes. But then other times, I don't know why. Sometimes I don't want to come if I haven't done my homework. And then--I don't understand. I don't know why. I think we're scared to take on responsibility and stuff. And that's because the people who we keep company with, you know. And it's just--I don't know--people--when we see people, you know, and they're like role models. But they don't necessarily have to be good role models. And then we just settle for that. And we--I know that I don't want to settle for that, but it's just something in me that won't let me do more. So I settle. I know I could make Honor Roll here. . . . (Formal Interview, April 18, 1983:58).

Essentially, Kaela's view of the opportunity structure as being racially biased has undermined and diminished her effort in the school context. Her refusal to put forth the necessary effort to do well in school relates to her strong identification with the problems and concerns of Black Americans. As her racial awareness has grown, there has emerged an inverse relationship in her school effort and achievement. When she was much younger and less cognizant of the total implications of what it means to be Black in America, her school performance, in her view, was not affected; however, as she matured and became aware of how Blackness in America is stigmatized, her academic performance in school has suffered. At this point, her perception of what is available to her as a Black adult worker is best characterized by a reference to restrictions; hence, like most of her class- and schoolmates, she views participation in much of the core curriculum at the school as something which should be avoided because she will not be able to utilize most of what is

obtained in such courses in the jobs and occupations which are and will be available to her after she leaves Capital High. Kaela's absence from school is the only way she is able to cope with the "burden of acting white". Were she to attend school on a daily basis, her grades would reflect her well-developed academic skills as well as her ability to readily handle most of the subject matter offered at the school for students at her grade level. In order to avoid being identified as a "brainiac", Kaela takes herself out of the school context as much as possible, thereby minimizing the possibility that she will be so identified. A discussion of how the high-achieving students at Capital cope with the "burden of acting white" follows.

B. The High-Achieving Students

Unlike the underachieving members of the research sample, the high-achieving students have made a conscious decision to pursue school success, and are therefore much more vulnerable to the charge and perception of "acting white". Because they are so vulnerable to this charge, they have also developed sex-specific strategies for "coping with the burden of 'acting white'." Several citations from this category of students are useful in this regard.

Martin, a high-achieving student, has decided not to go to college after high school. His fear of college is also reflected in his unwillingness to take the advanced courses available to him at the school and often recommended by his counselors. It is also evident in his avoidance of classroom and school behaviors and actions, including grades, which might lead his friends and schoolmates to label him a "brainiac" or, alternatively, a "pervert brainiac". To be known as a "brainiac" is bad enough, but to be known as a "pervert" is tantamount to receiving the kiss of death. Surprisingly, he claims that for a male student to be known as a brainiac raises questions

about his manhood; to be known as a "pervert brainiac" leaves little doubt. Consequently, is is, in his view, important for male students at the school to be careful of their school personae and to cloak them in other activities which minimize the harm which is likely to follow from being known as a brainiac. He claims that there are persistent rumors that some of the male students taking all or a large number of the Advanced Placement courses at the school are homosexuals; this is far less the case for males who remain in the regular curriculum program. Consequently, in an effort to minimize the possibility of being known as a brainiac, and thereby bringing one's manhood into question, male students who are doing well in school often resort to "lunching", i.e., to behaviors which suggest that they are clowns, comedians, do not work very hard at earing the grades they receive, etc.

Martin outlined his own response to this fear of being thought of as a brainiac and the unconscious questioning of his male sexual orientation:

> Yeah, it's--I don't want nobody to be calling me one, 'cause I know I ain't no brainiac. But if they call you one, you might seem odd. To them. 'Cause they'll always be joning on you. See, when I was at Kaplan [Junior High School], that's what they called me--"brainiac", 'cause I made straight As and Bs, that's all in the First Advisory. So that's why . . . (Formal Interview, March 23, 1983:67).

Martin went on to tell me that male students who do not make good grades in school are less likely to be thought of as being gay. Additionally, he pointed out that male students who are doing well in school are much more likely to "clown around" than the male students who are not doing well in school, suggesting that school and schooling is perceived to be a "feminized institution" (Sexton 196), perhaps unconsciously, by many of the male students at the school. His responses in this area suggest that he does not put forth as much effort as he might have were he not shackled with the burden of worrying about his peers' perception of him. Consequently, although he comes to

school every day (he missed only one day during the 10th grade) and completes most of the homework his teachers assign, he does not do work in excess of the tasks outlined in the assignments.

Norris is another high-achieving student who has developed specific strategies for coping with the "burden of acting white". He graduated from Garden Junior High as the Valedictorian of his class. His first semester at Capital, he earned all As in the major classes he took. His only grade which was not an A was a C in Physical Education. His score on the PSAT was also impressive--at the 96th percentile on the math component and at the percentile on the verbal component. While he was just a little bit leery of his ability to perform well in the high school context, again he learned that he was able to do the work at Capital without too much effort. Not surprisingly, he attributes the appearance of a lack of effort on his part as being critically important in his acceptance by his peers. Because he did not study in elementary and junior high school, he appeared to have a "talent" or special gift, and was therefore not thought to be a "pervert" brainiac. While this tends to minimize some of the hostility experienced by many students, especially Black males, who do well in school, his academic effort has not been free of conflict. His desire for friends led him to develop a kind of comedic persona.

Because he realized early in his schooling--even in elementary school--that he was academically ahead of most of the students in his class and most of the school, and because he also realized that he had to live among these students, he deliberately planned a course of action which would minimize the obstacles that would stymie his academic effort and development. Since fighting was an important part of the students' lives in elementary school, Norris deliberately chose friends who would act as protectors in exchange for his

help on homework assignments, tests, etc. He was not very picky about who they were. His primary concern was that they were able to "protect him" in case someone wanted to fight him.

> I didn't want to--you know, be with anybody that was like me [in elementary school], 'cause I didn't want to get beat up. The school I went to, Berkeley, was really rough, see? It was really rough. So I had to hang with people that were tough, you know. Lived in the projects and everything, and known tough and everything. So I used to hang with them. If anybody ever came in my face and wanted to pick on me, they'd always be there to help me. So I always made sure I had at least two or three bullies to be my friends. Even though if it does mean I have to give up answers in class. . . . I was willing to give up a little to get a lot. So I did that for elementary school. Then, by the time I got to junior high school, I said, 'Forget it. If people don't tend to accept me the way I am, that's too bad. I don't need any friends, I have myself' (Formal Interview, January 11, 1983:10-11).

His alliance with the "bullies and hoodlum" kids in elementary school was a successful survival strategy; however, in junior high school, Norris chose to behave differently, and it was in that context that he began to develop the "clown" or "comedic" personality which is still a part of his school persona.

> [In junior high school], I had to act crazy then. . . you know, nutty, kind of loony, they say . . . [the students would then say], 'He's crazy'--not a class clown, to get on the teacher's nerves, I never did that to the--around them. I'd be crazy. As soon as I hit that class, it was serious business. . . . Only the people who knew me knew my crazy side, when they found out I was smart, they wouldn't believe it. And the people that knew that I was smart, wouldn't believe it if they were told that I was crazy. So I went through that. I'm still like that now, though (Formal Interview, January 11, 1983:11-12).

Like Martin, Norris has had to develop specific strategies to obscure his academic ability. However, unlike Martin, who has decided not to go to college, Norris is certain that he will receive scholarship offers which will enable him

to go to college. Despite the different career options of these high-achieving male students, each of them affirms the risks they take in choosing to pursue academic success. Nevertheless, each of them has carefully considered the options available to him and has tailored his academic effort to mesh with that perceived reality. For instance, Martin's GPA is above average, and he is a member of the school's chapter of the National Honor Society. However, his performance on the PSAT was not what he wanted it to be, nor what he thinks and has been told that college recruiters want and expect of Black students who are admitted to high-status colleges in order to follow the academic track. Consequently, he has decided that he will not go to college despite his above-average GPA and generally high attendance and positive evaluation by his classroom teachers. On the other hand, Norris' high GPA, membership in the National Honor Society, and excellent performance on the PSAT and other standardized measures, reinforce his belief that, despite the impoverished status of his mother and other family members, he will be able to attend one of the prestigious colleges in the country. His view of his skills, which has been validated in the school context by both his classroom teachers and his performance on standardized measures, leads him to believe that he can act as if he is independent of the group (see Weis 1985) because he is fairly certain that he will be able to obtain the goal he has established for himself. Martin is not as certain of the strength of his academic skills. While his performance in the classroom contexts suggests that he is well ahead of his peers at least in his willingness to display his academic skills, his teachers' and other school personnel's assessment of his academic acumen has not been validated on standardized measures of school success. Hence, unlike Norris, whose skills and abilities have been validated both by the officials at Capital High and by the larger social system through the

standardized measures administered at the school, Martin is far less certain about his ability to act as an individual free of the support and help of the Black collectivity (see Weis 1985). How the high-achieving females cope with the "burden of acting white" is described below.

The high-achieving girls appear to be less constrained in what is considered appropriate academic behavior for them. Nevertheless, they, too, must develop gender-specific strategies for "coping with the burden of acting white". Even more than the male students, they must (1) not brag or bring excessive attention to themselves as a result of their academic achievements; (2) seek ways to mute the possibility of being perceived as a "brainiac" or, alternatively, (3) develop a comedic persona. In general, the high-achieving girls seek to achieve academic excellence while at the same time appearing to be invisible in the school context. The following two examples are illustrative of the coping strategies the female students adopt at Capital High in order to achieve their individual goals.

Katrina has the highest GPA of any student in the 11th grade. Her best academic subjects are math and math-related subjects; her weakest subjects are in the humanities and social sciences. Her performance on the math component of the PSAT last fall was at the 95th percentile. Only one other student scored higher than she, and only one other student had a score that was comparable to hers. Her overall score on the PSAT far surpassed that of most of her class- and schoolmates.

Katrina admits that she has had to put brakes on her academic performance in the school context in order to minimize the stress she experiences. In most instances she is much better at handling the subject matter than her peers, but, like many of the other high-achieving students, she tries not to be conspicuous.

> Junior high, I didn't have much problem. I mean, I didn't have--there were always a lot of people in the classroom who did the work, so I wasn't like, the only one who did this assignment. So--I mean, I might do better at it, but I wasn't the only one. And so a lot of times, I'd let other kids answer--I mean, not let them, but . . . . All right, I let them answer questions [laughter], and I'd hold back. So I never really got into any arguments, you know, about school and my grades or anything (Formal Interview, February 8, 1983:26).

The important point to keep in mind is that, although she was extremely fearful of what might happen to her if she acted in ways which were not sanctioned by her peer group, she was and still is unwilling to give up on her desire to do well in school. Hence she chose to "go underground", to become a visible but invisible person. By using this technique, she did not bring attention to herself, thereby minimizing the possibility of appearing to be different from those persons around her. Katrina constantly worries, even today, about appearing to be overly confident. An example from one interview session with her supports this observation. The "It's Academic Club" is perhaps the most "intellectual" extracurricular activity at the school. In order to get to participate on the three-person team, students must compete by answering correctly a "test" the school sponsor has established for the participants. The students obtaining the three highest scores are identified and are then eligible to participate on the team representing the school, on television. Katrina was unable to avoid taking the test because of her ongoing relationship with the club's sponsor, who was her Physics teacher. However, she established certain preconditions for participation in the qualifying activity: she would take the test but, even if she earned a score which would make her eligible for participating on the school's team, she was not to be selected to participate on the school's team on television. Having obtained the consent of the club's sponsor and her counselor to these

preconditions, she took the qualifying exam. Obviously, as a result of her score on the qualifying exam, she was one of the three students eligible to participate on the school's team. However, since she had made it quite clear to the club's advisor and all other interested parties that she was not to be chosen as one of the team's members, she was made an alternate team member. She found this arrangement quite satisfying for several reasons: (1) it allowed her to display her knowledge to her teachers and some of her supportive friends, thereby validating her academic capabilities; (2) at the same time, she was able to retain her invisibility as a high-achieving student, a sorely-desired status on her part; and (3) she satisfied, at least in part, her teacher's request that she compete for one of the most highly sought academic positions at the school (Formal Interview, March 7, 1983). Katrina was very pleased with herself because she had proven that she is capable of outperforming most of her peers at the school--even those students who are 12th graders. At the same time, she was able to remain anonymous and invisible in the school context. Her invisibility makes it so much easier to pursue her goal of academic excellence.

Like all the other female students, she has heard the term "brainiac" used by many students at Capital and at the elementary and junior high school levels. Having attended school only in Washington, D.C., in the Capital Community and the surrounding area, she is very much aware of the nuances associated with the term.

> When they call someone a "brainiac", they mean he's always in the books. But he probably isn't <u>always</u> in the books. Straight A, maybe--you know, or As and Bs. A Goody Two-Shoes with the teacher, maybe--you know, the teacher always calling on them, and they're always the leaders in the class or something (Formal Interview, March 7, 1983:5).

Katrina did acknowledge that she is often referred to as a brainiac, but that she always denies that she is and she does not even like the idea of her peers

referring to her in that manner. Referring to her as a brainiac "blows her cover" and exposes her to the very forces she has sought so hard to avoid: alienation, ridicule, physical harm and the inability to live up to the name. In short, becoming known as a smart student enhances the possibility of the emergence of affective dissonance, with all its negative repercussions.

Rita is unlike any of the other female high achievers; they attend classes almost every day and tend to do what their teachers tell them to do. Rita does not. She readily admits that she strategically cuts classes and makes deliberate plans for achieving her goals of getting the most return for as little effort as possible in all of her classes. While Rita makes fairly good grades in school, her effort is not consistent, so she has to work hard one advisory and is then able to coast the next advisory, her preferred modus operandi. Her grade record at Capital reflects this deliberate practice.

Additionally, in stark contrast to the other female high achievers whose school personae are best characterized as serious, Rita is seen as a clown and is often described by friends, peers and classmates as "that crazy Rita". This is true even though it is also widely known that her academic skills exceed those of most members of the student body, male and female. However, the first perception of her, i.e., she is "crazy", takes precedence over all other definitions of her. Consequently, as was true for Norris, Rita is judged primarily by her interactions with peers and classmates, and in the classroom context by her behavioral interaction with her teachers, and not by her academic accomplishment. Unfortunately, Rita feels a greater need to be a comedian when in the presence of her school peers and her teachers, consequently the comedic persona is reinforced in this context among these people. Silliness enables her to cope with the pressure of school achievement and peer pressure, which in many noticeable ways does not condone academic excellence.

Admittedly, this kind of public persona--the comedian--is unusual among the female school population at Capital; yet, it appears to serve the same purpose for Rita as it does for Norris: it tends to thwart the latent hostility of her peers, enabling her to do what she wants to do in school with the support of her peers.

Rita's performance on standardized measures of school success surpasses that of most of the other high-achieving females in the study and, indeed, of most of her peers at Capital, particularly in the non-math areas. For example, she had the school's highest score (at the 96th percentile) on the verbal component of the PSAT this year; her math score, however, was less impressive (at the 62nd percentile). She claims that her lower math score was not surprising because she has never been very strong in math. Her performance on the CTBS exam was equally outstanding: she scored at the OGE of 13.6 on all except one subsection of the exam--spelling. Even in that area she scored 11.8, which was right at grade level. She also made an impressive score on the Life Skills Exam, passing each of the nine objectives with a number greater than the minimum required.

Not surprisingly, because of Rita's high performance on the PSAT, she was ultimately selected as one of the five students nominated from Capital for the National Merit Scholarship for Outstanding Negro Students.

During our first interview session, Rita acknowledged that she enjoys activities which her family and some of her friends view as "white activities", such as going to museums or listening to music performed by white artists. In fact, Rita has a difficult time identifying with the disparaged economic and social conditions of Black Americans, so much so that she told me on more than one occasion that she is often flabbergasted when people ask her if she views herself as a white person.

> . . . Some--a lot of times I have people ask me that--if I think I am white! But I don't know, maybe it's me. Maybe I don't carry myself like a Black person. I don't know. But I'm Black. And I can't go painting myself white or some other color, it's something that I have to live with. So it's the way it is and it's not like having to live with herpes or something--it's not bad. It's--I think it's just the same as being white, as far as I'm concerned--everybody's equal (Formal Interview, May 4, 1983:109).

Rita maintains that she does not understand why her schoolmates, family members and other Black Americans view her as a non-Black person. Yet, many of her behaviors suggest that she is conscious of the negative sanctions associated with behaviors which are viewed as inappropriate for someone who is really Black. This is reflected in the clown persona she has developed and which is the most prominent component of her socially constructed identity.

To sum up, all of the high-achieving students--males and females--wrestle with the conflict inherent in the unique relationship of Black people with dominant group institutions: the struggle to achieve success while at the same time retaining the support and approval of other Black people. In the school context, the immediate issue for the high-achieving students is how to obtain good grades, the support and good wishes of the adults in the school, while minimizing the perceptions of their peers which frequently suggest that they are guilty of "acting white". As I have tried to show in the above examples, each of the high-achieving students has developed a unique and specific set of strategies which enables him or her to "cope with the burden of acting white" in the school context. While these skills are sex-specific with some overlapping, e.g., the clown personae of Rita and Norris, in general, the high-achieving females have developed gender-appropriate strategies for coping with the "burden of acting white", and the males have developed comparable strategies, but they are specifically appropriate for male students.

The most prominent strategy for coping with the burden of acting white among the female high achievers is "invisibility". With the exception of Rita, all of the females are noticeable by their lack of visibility. Each of them seeks the approval of her peers by consciously appearing not to be a brainiac. While this strategy--appearing not to be a brainiac--is shared by the male high achievers, the techniques used to achieve this desired end are different. Among the male high achievers, one can mute the latent hostility of the peer group,as well as the dominant society, by participating in activities that are perceived by all students to be for the good of the school. Included among these activities are athletic activities, including football, basketball, baseball, track, etc.; and the school band. Males can also lessen the "burden of acting white" by developing a comedic persona. If a male (or female) is identified as a comedian, he (or she) is not taken seriously and, consequently, one's efforts at school success and academic achievement are either (1) not taken seriously and/or (2) because the persona is highlighted, the student's efforts to achieve school success are not perceived to be threatening either to the persistence of the Black community or to the dominant society. Essentially, the strategies developed by the high-achieving students--males and females--which at the surface level tend to suggest that they are not completely committed to academic achievement and upward mobility as defined by the dominant society, enable them to cope with the resistance to "acting white" which they experience from both the dominant society and the Black community.

IV. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

In this analysis I have tried to show how Black children's efforts to achieve school success are riddled with conflict and uncertainty. One set of factors emanates from the intrusive, dominant society; another set is generated within the group. While the focus in this analysis has tended to highlight the intragroup factors, particularly the group's quintessential symbol of peoplehood--fictive kinship--, it is important to keep in mind that there are both intergroup and intragroup factors which make it necessary for Black children to develop gender-specific strategies for coping with "the burden of acting white". Because I have dealt at length with how the macro factors adversely affect Black adolescents' school performance elsewhere (see Fordham 1982a), I have focused my attention in this analysis on intragroup responses: how Black Americans respond to other Black Americans' efforts to "make it".

Using Ogbu's (1978, 1981c, 1981g) cultural ecological model of Black and other nondominant-group children's school performance, I developed the fictive kinship model to explain how and why some Black children seek to achieve academic excellence in the school context, despite the pervasive and extensive socioeconomic barriers in the opportunity structure. Also, earlier in this presentation, I argued that because of the limitations in the opportunity structure for Black Americans, particularly the "job ceiling" (Ogbu 1978, Drake and Cayton 1970) and the boundary-maintaining mechanisms in the Black community which have emerged in response to the limitations in the opportunity structure, working for school success among Black adolescents is in many ways learning to cope with the "burden of acting white". In response to the vise-like nature of these forces--limitations and resistance to academic achievement among Black adolescents from the dominant society as well as fear of

co-optation of group members who "make it" within the Black community--, Black adolescents' school performance is most often negatively affected. It is also in response to these forces that Black adolescents who opt for academic excellence develop strategies which enable them to achieve school success. These strategies, which are gender-specific, include engaging in activities in the school context which mute the perception of being preoccupied with academic excellence. Such activities include athletic activities and other "team"-oriented activities among the male students which suggest that their interests and goals are not limited to, and/or even better yet, are not about their individual goals and desire for upward mobility. This is true, I argued, because the fictive kinship model of social organization, which emerged in the Black community in response to the general lack of social mobility for Black Americans, tends to reward group solidarity and advancement over individual school achievement and/or individual mobility of group members. Since fictive kinship is the quintessential symbol of Black Americans' sense of peoplehood, violations of the norms associated with this critical group symbol expose the individual to a sense of alienation, lack of "anchorage" (Cohen 1964) and affective dissonance. Because "success" in the school context carries with it the perception of a preoccupation with "individualistic" goals and aspirations, many Black adolescents, I postulated, choose to eschew it as a viable academic option. Examples from the research literature as well as my recent research site were presented to support this assertion. However, as this analysis demonstrates, those students who refuse to forgo academic excellence and the attendant school success, are likely to have to develop strategies and skills which will enable them to cope with the "burden of (being perceived as) 'acting white'".

The question thus becomes: What are some implications associated with the analysis I have presented here? Obviously there are different levels of implications of the analysis presented here. This is the case because, as I have repeatedly indicated, both the emergence of the extant fictive kinship system in the Black community and the attendant fear of "acting white" are responses to the limitations in the opportunity structure which, at least in the perceptual vision of Black Americans (see J. Williams 1985), are directed specifically at them. First, at the level of the dominant social system, the existence of limitations in the opportunity structure which suggest to Black Americans that they are judged first and foremost on ascriptively assigned social features must be eliminated. The elimination of these barriers will result in the dissipation of the boundary-maintaining mechanisms in the Black community; mechanisms which suggest to group members that success in dominant-group institutions, corporations, etc., is prima facie evidence that group members occupying such positions, etc., are guilty of "acting white".

At another level, Black adolescents' energetic and often diffused response to the restrictive nature of the opportunity structure must be challenged and channeled in such a manner that even if the existing structure remains as immutable as it has been since the European colonists settled here, a much larger number of them would become involved in changing rather than serving as unwitting instruments of their continued oppression. In this sense, schooling for Black adolescents must become a "subversive activity" ? (Weingarten and Postman 19) with group-specific unintended outcomes. These unintended outcomes would be similar to those outlined by Sargent (1985) in his discussion of how his schooling and even his encapsulation in the fictive kinship system served as the impetus for his academic excellence and attendant school success. For him, despite the fact that he was not taught Black history

in the school context and learned very little about the ecological conditions of Black people in America, the skills acquired in the school context--reading, writing and computation--were judiciously used to enhance his knowledge of Black people in America and to learn how he could become an instrument in the liberation of the group. Sargent's (1985) description of his response to both the intrusive limitations condoned and supported by the dominant society and the efforts of his peers to limit both the range and scope of his academic effort by accusing him of "acting white" were unilaterally unsuccessful offers critically important data for helping Black parents and teachers to alter their childrearing practices when working with Black adolescents.

Unfortunately, this can only be an interim strategy because, as this analysis tends to demonstrate, the critically important change must occur in the opportunity structure, thereby resulting in a change in the perception and behaviors of Black students. Barring such a change in the opportunity structure, the perceptions and the behaviors of Black students in the school context are unlikely to change to the extent necessary to have a significant change in the existing boundary-maintaining mechanisms in the community. Therefore, until the perceptions of the nature and configuration of the opportunity structure changes (see J. Williams 1985), the response of Black students in the school context is likely to continue to be one which suggests that school achievement is a kind of risk which necessitates strategies enabling them to cope with the "burden of acting white".

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